

Good morning, Co-chairs, Members of the Higher Education Committee and Employment Committee:

My name is Amy Geary. I fully support House Bill 6517.

Although I did not grow up in CT, I am a graduate of Connecticut universities. Graduating from Eastern CT State University with a bachelor's degree in psychology in 2001, receiving my master's degree in special education from Southern CT State University in 2003, earning my 6th-year master's degree in literacy from Sacred Heart University in 2007 and returning to Sacred Heart University to obtain my administration certificate in 2014.

I am currently the Director of Literacy Supports for ISAAC School in New London. ISAAC is a charter school with a diverse population of students in grades six to eight. Before this administrative role, I was a special education teacher for 14 years and later a reading consultant for six years at a rural middle school in Southeastern CT.

Early in my teaching career, administrators and veteran teachers told me to accept that some children would not learn to read, no matter what I did. They also stated that spelling did not matter; students should learn to use spell checkers. With that as the school's underlying tenet, I became the middle school's self-contained reading teacher. I diagnosed reading difficulties, planned appropriate lessons, monitored progress, modified and differentiated lessons as needed. I also ensured that I used pre-, during, and post-reading strategies. For example, I gave the readers a purpose for reading, pre-taught vocabulary, built background knowledge, and other comprehension strategies that support reading.

I also taught them word attack strategies. If they stumbled upon a word they couldn't read, I taught them how to sound it out. Then I asked if the word made sense in the sentence. If it did, then they should continue to read. If it didn't, I would ask them, "Look at the beginning of the word. What word would make sense in the sentence? Take a guess. Does that make sense?" When students would struggle, guess wrong, and continue reading, my training told me they were not "monitoring their understanding."

One scenario that still plagues my memory is an eighth-grade student who had difficulty reading and was a dysfluent reader. Using the strategy I taught, he read aloud, "The farmer brushed the tail of his house before he left the barn." I quickly knew from my years of collegiate level training that the student was not monitoring his comprehension. I did not connect the dots that he was likely dyslexic, even though he had difficulty decoding, word accuracy, and fluency. In 2003 and 2007, dyslexia was not a part of my repertoire.

A couple of years later, another student entered my classroom. He had attended school every day since Kindergarten. He was now in sixth grade. This child was able to read only five to six words. One of these words was his first name. He could not read his second name, though, which was Joseph. Yet, he was articulate, funny, personable, and gregarious. He had dyslexia.

Most importantly, he was my student and my responsibility for the next three years. I felt the weight and panic of this obligation. I had no idea where to start. The elementary teachers said they had tried everything; he was just a student who couldn't learn to read, despite years in special education.

Two administrators in my building at the time led me in the right direction. The first gave me an evidenced-based structured literacy program and told me to try that. Each daily lesson included phonemic awareness, phonics, reading, spelling, and comprehension systematically and explicitly. The second administrator created an individualized class schedule that included 1:1 instruction five days a week.

Additionally, I participated in an intensive two-year program to teach the reading program with fidelity. In other words, my special ed. and remedial reading degrees had not prepared me to teach someone how to read. I had to take on two years of training beyond my post-secondary education to teach reading effectively. I am happy to report that this particular student did learn how to read. Yet, I have encountered many other students who have transitioned to middle school with minimal decoding skills, despite their cognitive abilities and years of special education services.

Many special education teachers and reading specialists are dedicated professionals who do not have the tools needed to teach students with dyslexia. While they have spent years obtaining a degree from a reputable CT university, they graduate with an understanding to teach comprehension strategies or ill-equipped decoding strategies, such as guessing. Then these same teachers are held accountable when their students score low on state tests. The system of teaching and learning is failing both students and teachers. Unfortunately, special education teachers and reading specialists/consultants enter into their new careers without this knowledge.

A plethora of reading research has strong indications that early identification is key to closing the reading gap. As administrators looking to hire special education teachers and reading specialists, we have to budget for the extra expense of training teachers in structured literacy programs for our students with dyslexia, which translates into thousands of dollars for tuition fees, and a time commitment of one-to-two years from the

teacher. This is a costly endeavor for all stakeholders. Sadly, it is the students who must wait to get proper instruction.

Learning to read is vital! Implementing instruction that is diagnostic, systematic, explicit, and cumulative is necessary. Teachers genuinely want to teach their students to reach their fullest potential. Students desperately need it and cannot wait any longer. Therefore, I strongly urge you to support the essential frameworks and accountability measures set forth by House Bill 6517.

Thank you!

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